

KARGIL CONFLICT: A PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE

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The mounting tension between India and Pakistan reached a high point of escalation on Wednesday when India launched air strikes against guerrillas said to be trapped in the Kargil region of occupied Kashmir. Coming in the wake of skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC) which started on May 9, the latest military offensive by India has serious implications for peace in South Asia and frayed relations between the two countries. It is a pity that right at a time when these subcontinental neighbours were making a concerted effort to normalize their relations, the tensions between the two sides should have boiled over. For three weeks the Indian and the Pakistan armies have been locked in an artillery battle across the LoC in which over 100 people have been killed.

The root of the crisis is the unresolved problem of Kashmir which has prompted the Kashmiris' struggle against the Indian occupation since 1990.

The main provocation for the Indians on this occasion is said to be the presence of about 450 heavily armed freedom fighters holed up in Kargil. They have brought the Indians under tremendous pressure causing them to retaliate against Pakistan across the LoC.

Indo-Pakistan relations have suddenly taken a downward plunge. This is something neither of the two governments should feel complacent about. Having fought two indecisive wars over Kashmir so far, they, more than many others, should know that an armed conflict does not solve any problems. If anything, it creates new ones by unleashing terror and destruction. In the case of these two countries, a conflict, even of a limited nature, would set the clock back on the normalization process which they initiated earlier this year. If there is a silver lining to the gathering clouds of animosity and mistrust in South Asia, it is that the two countries have not slammed the door of communications between them. The Indian prime minister spoke to Mr Nawaz Sharif on Monday to put across New Delhi's point of view on the latest developments in held Kashmir and along the LoC. But it is plain that optimum use has not been made of the communication channels so far to defuse tensions and prevent the military situation along the Line of Control from getting out of hand.

Seen against this backdrop, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's call for a halt to the clashes between Indian and Pakistani troops across the LoC is most timely. The two governments which are moving to an eyeball-to-eyeball position need to be advised that they should pull back at once in order to avert a war. In fact other governments which claim to have a fundamental interest in the peace and security of the region should come forward now to prevent a conflict in South Asia which would prove utterly ruinous for this impoverished region. Given the nuclear capability that India and Pakistan now possess, a war between them should be

avoided at all cost. Even if a war is fought initially with conventional weapons, there is no way to ensure that one or the other combatant would not be tempted to use a nuclear device or two out of miscalculation or sheer desperation. That kind of possibility is much too ominous even to contemplate.

The need is indeed for the governments in Islamabad and New Delhi to see reason. The time has also come for active diplomatic intervention by outside powers. In the short term, this calls for prevailing on the two governments to pull back their forces from the LoC and exercise restraint. Once the crisis has eased, it is also important that the Kashmir issue should be taken up in real earnest to find a political settlement to this long-standing dispute. Such running sores can become instant flashpoints and trigger hostilities when left unresolved for long. Kashmir has been a hot spot since 1947. It has led to two wars between India and Pakistan. It is time now to try to resolve it once and for all by peaceful means.